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THE COLUMBIAN UNIVERSITY

ADDRESS

OF

HERBERT PUTNAM, LITT. D., LL. D.

LIBRARIAN OF CONGRESS

AT THE

EIGHTY-SECOND ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT

OF THE

DEPARTMENTS OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

JUNE 3, 1903

AT THE NATIONAL THEATER

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ADDRESS
OF
THE LIBRARIAN OF CONGRESS.

PRESIDENT NEEDHAM, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN :

To a librarian such an occasion as this is a tempting one. We are at the National Capital, under the shadow of a constitution, at the heart of a national system, based upon books; constructed—with some compromises!—upon discussion of the best models which books afford. We are under an administration whose first magistrate is a historian and man of letters, whose second—to go no further—is a man of letters and historian. We are in an era when men from academic life are being incessantly and increasingly drawn into the public service, and asked to bring to its problems judgments formed by the study of books. And the occasion itself is an academic one,—with every justification that that implies for eulogium of the power and of the instruction which through books are brought to us from the ages past and from the lands beyond our gate.

Such an occasion is, I say, for a librarian a tempting one; for an audience therefore perhaps a perilous one. And yet the choice of a librarian to deliver an address to a graduating class is singular. For you who are leaving the academic portals are supposed to be laying aside books. You are leaving them to take up life. At some institutions you would leave them in ashes: you would burn them, as things

whose utility, so far as you are concerned, has passed, and for whose recent tyranny you might now show your just contempt. You are about to enter upon life itself; and have no longer use for books, which give you life only at second hand. This occasion would then be the least appropriate for a panegyric upon books or an exposition of the uses of books. But I propose neither. I have been asked to say something to you not about books (though they are not forbidden), but about libraries; and not about libraries in general but about a particular system of libraries, the system which forms part of the laboratory equipment of your university itself. This may be to the purpose: for as alumni and alumnae, the interests of your university will be with you still a chief concern. You will wish to do all in your power to augment its resources: you will at least wish to be able to state with clearness and precision just what these resources are, in order that the university may secure a proper repute for them, which will draw to its faculty men of strength and to its student-body men and women ambitious for the best. This will be your duty to it as graduates, your primary duty, and a small enough acknowledgment of the benefits which you have received from it.

I incline to take as text a passage from an unfamiliar book: perhaps the only book within your reach which you have not read during the past four years. It is the Catalogue of Columbian University. And the passage is that in the introduction entitled the "Educational Advantages of Washington." Part of it deals with the opportunities, at the Medical Museum and elsewhere, for the study of normal and morbid anatomy and of dental perfections and imperfections: matters of intimate concern, but not within my

field. Another part calls attention to the Government laboratories of science, whose methods offer a profitable field of study and whose apparatus is to some extent made available to student investigators. The most of it, however, consists of a statement of the library resources in Washington, with a reference to the Resolution of Congress, approved April 12, 1892, which makes such of them as are subject to the federal government "accessible * * * to students of any institution of higher education now incorporated or hereafter to be incorporated under the laws of Congress or of the District of Columbia." The resolution uses the term "collections," which includes much more than books: but every government institution or bureau mentioned contains a library, and the list starts off with the Library of Congress. The statement in the catalogue is clear; but I should like to expand it a little. The list includes but twelve institutions and bureaus. Twenty-two others supported by the federal Government have collections of books which under present practice are now in fact equally accessible to the student and to any serious investigator. There are thus in the city of Washington *thirty-four* governmental libraries freely available for research. These libraries now contain in the aggregate over two million books and pamphlets and over a half million other articles literary in character—manuscripts, maps, music and prints. If we add to them the contents of the District Library and of the libraries of private associations and institutions,—The Catholic University, Georgetown College, Columbian itself, and others,—we shall have a total not merely greater than is to be found in any other city of this size in the world; but one which in proportion to population represents several times as many volumes *per capita* as exist for public use in *any* other city of the world.

The character of these collections is still more significant. If you will take that catalogue of your university and will check through the list of courses you will find not one to the pursuit of which some governmental library cannot contribute; and only one to which the government fails to furnish a 'practically efficient, if not entirely complete, working library. (The exceptional course is Biblical literature: but even this may not require literary resources more elaborate than the needs of Congress have called for in the Library of Congress.) The most significant circumstance is, however, that of these thirty-four governmental libraries thirty-three exist for the purpose of developing each a collection within a particular field, while the thirty-fourth (the Library of Congress) as a national library is a library general in scope and has for its field *all* literature.

The library of each scientific bureau is seeking every book within its means which will aid to the work of that bureau. These libraries as a whole are thus developing in response to the needs of specialists and under their direction. Now the scientific work of the federal government in the bureaus touches almost every branch of the natural and physical sciences. The resulting collections of books are thus coming to be large and efficient special libraries covering most of the sciences which enter into the curriculum of a university. The student of medicine has accessible to him the Library of the Surgeon-General's office, which is not merely the largest but the most efficient medical library in the world. The student of the common law has in the library of the Supreme Court (a division of the Library of Congress) a collection of Statutes, Reports and Commentaries which is one of the largest in the United States, though for lack of space it can-

not for the present be fully efficient, nor even uniformly accessible. The student of the civil law, of international law, of comparative jurisprudence is not yet adequately provided for; but he is to be. The libraries of the Department of Agriculture, of the State, War and Navy Departments, of the Department of Justice, of the Bureau of Education, of the Geological Survey, of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, of the Patent Office, of the National Museum, of the Weather Bureau, of the Labor Bureau, of the Naval Observatory, represent each a collection specially constructed for specific and authoritative service within the particular field indicated by its title.

Of course the material accumulated in these collections will be primarily that which aids the investigations or bears upon the operations of the Government. But even thus it covers pretty nearly every division of pure science, the natural and physical sciences, law, medicine and mathematics. It does not cover the philosophical sciences, theology, philosophy, the fine arts or belles lettres; nor in any general way sociology. It touches technology only in the library of the Patent Office, and history chiefly in the library of the State Department. But all these subjects for one reason and another, and in particular because they are not covered by any other governmental collection, are a particular obligation upon the Library of Congress.

When the resolution of Congress took effect eleven years ago the Library of Congress was a huge but undigested mass of material, partly shelved, but in larger part in heaps, on the floor, in closets, in vaults, under stairways—700,000 volumes crowded into spaces in the aggregate capable of affording accessible accommodation for less than half that number.

It was not and could not be systematically classified; it had not and could not have complete or exact catalogues,—nor any catalogue accessible to the public. It lay in the Capitol—a building primarily for legislative uses. It was administered by a force of but forty-two persons, who were in addition charged with the entire copyright business—and had no adequate facilities for any part of their business, much less a margin of facilities which could give aid and comfort to a reader. The fund for increase was but \$10,000 a year.

Today the Library of Congress is a collection, including duplicates, of over 1,100,000 books and pamphlets and nearly half a million other articles. It is housed in a building devoted to its sole use: the largest library building in the world, the most commodious, the most efficient in equipment for the work which it has to do;—a building which provides for ample classification and display of the material, for reasonable growth and for a multitude and great variety of service;—a building which may accommodate a thousand readers at a time and differentiate them to their best advantage. As against forty-two employees for all purposes there are now in its service (including the force caring for the building, the Copyright Office, and the Branch bindery and printing office) four hundred and eighty-seven persons. From \$10,000 a year the funds for increase have risen to \$100,000 a year. The Library still receives without cost two copies of every book or other article entered under the copyright law; it has the benefit of the international exchanges of public documents; and it is the custodian of the library of the Smithsonian Institution—a superb collection of the publications of learned societies. The books are

shelved; and a modern, expansive system of classification is being applied to them. A card catalogue, not merely by authors, but also by subject, is being compiled, and as compiled is made available to the public. Reference lists and bibliographies of special subjects of current or of scholarly interest are being issued in book form and freely distributed. The Library has still Ainsworth Spofford and the other men who with him made the collection at the Capitol useful in spite of harassing conditions. And it has gained numerous other experts, including some who are in a different sense specialists—who have had specific training in the subject matter of various departments of knowledge. It has, for instance, such specialists in history, in economics, in theology, in philology, in chemistry, in physics, mathematics, astronomy, biology, ethnology, technology, music; competent linguists, of course (books are now being catalogued in over a hundred different languages and dialects); accomplished bibliographers; highly trained classifiers and cataloguers; experts in the art of making books useful, and whatever else goes to the technique of library administration—but also specialists.

This large force, except as it may be caring for the plant or directly busy with the reader, is engaged in systematizing the collection, in equipping it with efficient apparatus, and in aiding to develop it by wise choice of material to be purchased. To their counsel is added that of many users of the Library who are themselves specialists: the scientists in the government service, members of the faculties of near-by institutions of learning,—of your own faculties. With these and other resources of counsel the Library is now, with its more ample funds, in a way to develop systematically. It

is progressing toward its goal. And this goal is: an organic collection covering every department of literature save such as are of necessity more appropriately covered by other governmental libraries within the district.

The Library of Congress was established primarily for the use of Congress; but in its content it was never merely a legislative library. With its present resources it is becoming a library not merely national, but *general*. It is seeking to acquire every book not already in possession of the Government, which is in content a contribution to knowledge. Countless books there are which it can never acquire: which are nevertheless the relish of the collector and give distinction to great libraries abroad. But these are books, or editions, whose interest is in their form or rarity, not in their content. Manuscripts also it will lack which are literary memorials and sources of history. But in so far as these bear upon American History it is likely to secure the substance of them in copies, transcript or facsimile. For it will endeavor to secure for use at Washington the substance, and where possible the form also, of every document which at present requires of the investigator a trip to London or Paris or Rome or Madrid or Seville or Simancas or the City of Mexico. For the study of American history indeed this Library and this city must be the centres. The manuscript sources in the present possession of the government would alone require this. The first two grants by the Carnegie Institution for historical research recognize it: one is for a statement by experts, more precise and more thorough than has ever before been accomplished, as to the nature, value, location and availability of these sources; another is a grant for the maintenance at Washington of an expert and assist-

ants, who shall aid, advise in and direct research involving the use of them.

But I refer to American history chiefly by way of example; for I can think of few branches of research involving the use of books for which Washington will not in time offer exceptional facilities.

The Library of Congress still specially serves Congress; it has a special duty to serve the Executive departments and scientific bureaus of the government; but it has in addition an ample margin of service to render to inquirers at large. It is a free public library; it is such to a degree not indicated by its title. It is, to be sure, a library primarily for reference use. So is every national library in the world; so are most of the great research libraries even of this country. As a library of record it has a duty to preserve; as a library for research it may perhaps best aid serious use by ensuring that the bulk of its collections shall be found by an investigator within its walls.

But these considerations do not preclude the issue for home use of a book required for a serious purpose by an investigator who cannot use it within the building. Indeed, the only regulation of use that has been formulated expressing the intent of the administration is: "The broadest possible use consistent with the convenience of Congress, the freest possible use consistent with the safety of the collections."

Consider then what Washington is to offer—what Columbian University is to offer: not a library but a whole system of libraries,—special libraries in particular fields of knowledge, and a general library covering every remaining field of knowledge and, so far as possible, all existing pro-

curable literature. The system is, to be sure, not yet organic. The various constituent libraries have heretofore been developed independently and without due regard for the field and the service proper to each. But a coöperation is now entered upon which will mean: a proper differentiation of each; uniformity of methods; the centralization of cataloguing; coöperative bibliographies; the interchange of material; and mutual service. The result may be an organic system of libraries unparalleled elsewhere. Did rhetoric permit I might call it "the most unique" library system in the world. But rhetoric doesn't permit;—also, that title has been appropriated by another "library system" with which we need not enter into competition.

This library system of the government is a laboratory for the university; and it is a laboratory maintained without a dollar of expense to the University—a prime consideration; for the University is poor. Of course it is poor: a university cannot reputably be otherwise than poor. I think, however, of another university of whose problems I have some knowledge,—of Harvard,—also poor—with a great library, to be sure, the greatest academic library in this country, but in deep perplexity for a building in which to accommodate it and for funds with which to increase and to administer it. A meagre \$70,000 a year is all that it can spare for increase and administration. And I cannot but contrast the fortune of Columbian, with even greater collections at its disposal, maintained and increased at a cost of a million dollars a year, but for which it does not have to divert a dollar from its precious funds for instruction.

In 1814 George Ticknor in Boston had to send to New Hampshire for a German dictionary and to ask Edward

Everett for the loan of a German grammar. A Euripides in the original could not be bought at any shop in New England. When he went to Göttingen he was astonished at the profuse expenditure there for books and in contrast the personal poverty of the professors. When a professor appeared in a new waistcoat the class burst into applause.—“How,” he asked, “did they behave when he appeared in a new coat?”—“A new coat!—a professor in a new coat!—Gott bewahre!—Such a thing never happened!!”

Well, conditions have improved since Ticknor's day. There is now a fair abundance of books at most seats of learning. At Columbian, at least, they are likely to be had without depriving your faculty of the luxury of an *occasional* new coat, and of leading the fashion in waistcoats.

I have been led to speak of these conditions to you this evening because I could speak of them as a librarian, and though not as librarian of the university, yet in a sense as one of the librarians *to* the university. The facts may be familiar to you, but the estimate of their significance from the technical and comparative standpoint of us who are dealing with them professionally may be less familiar. Perhaps you have been utilizing these resources to the full; at all events you will desire them to be utilized by your successors; and certainly you will desire them to count their fullest in the reputation of the university and its power of attraction.

I have kept my promise to abstain from the trite theme of the uses of books. You know more of these than I can tell you,—or than you yourselves will ever know again. This

occasion is for you the apex,—the summit of the hill of knowledge,—unsullied by experience. It is not merely a parting of the ways,—it is a parting of the wise. You will never be so wise again. You will know more; but you will never again be so wise. You will never again have the interest in books that you have had in the past few years, nor the confidence in their solution of the problems of life that you have today. The book which is now to concern you is the book of life. The book of life isn't easy reading. And it has no index. Rather, I should say, it has an index, and the index is where indexes should be—at the end. But it is shut to you till you reach the end. Indeed it is a book which each of you must not merely read but must write for himself. Write it fairly, write it sturdily, and it will be a book to last, even though it never find a publisher. It will at least form a section of that awful ledger, kept by the unerring accountant, which is to yield up its debits and credits against you at the final commencement day.

Cotton Mather used to oblige his children “to retire and ponder on that question ‘What should I wish I had done if I were now dead.’” A salutary but somewhat sombre diversion,—to which I shall not now invite you, though I might find precedents. The world is a cheerful world today; and the most interesting world that ever was; and the book that your life is to write may if you like be a cheerful and interesting book, and a helpful one; for full of service as the world appears, help is still needed.

It is a fashion of commencement addresses to advise you how to write it. I am not the one to advise you, and I shall not try. I have undertaken rather to say something of the opportunities which you are leaving than of those which lie

before you. If I should say anything of these latter, it would be only to urge you to apply to them the ideals, the standards, and as many as possible of the methods for which the academic life stands. *Freedom* is one: the academic freedom, which follows an argument to its consequences, however inconvenient; freedom to form an opinion, and to hold, and to utter it, even though it differ from your neighbor's; *tolerance* for his opinion though it differ from yours; *respect* for the accumulated judgment of the past as against the whim or emotion of the present. But I need not recapitulate them. They are familiar as the qualities most precious of the academic life. Do not, I beg of you, assume that they must be abandoned in the practical life.

The most of you have pursued a course in science; and you have had an opportunity afforded in no institution outside of Washington, of a near view of a great body of scientific workers, working at small compensation for great utilities, unmercenary, devoted, absorbed in the pursuit of truth for truth's own sake, furthest removed from commercialism. That is a privilege which your Catalogue does well to rank high. Those of you who have pursued the liberal arts have had in addition a larger participation in that literature which brings to you the example of other men of other times. If this literature can mean something to you hereafter, I would not, in spite of my pledge, urge you to lay it aside. I would not advise you wholly to abstain from the use of books even in your practical affairs;—I would not recommend this even to those of you who are to become librarians!

Lord Palmerston used to boast that he "never read printed books." Well, Lord Palmerston was a considerable man of

affairs. He sat in sixteen parliaments and held office for nearly half a century as Secretary of War, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Premier and First Lord of the Treasury. He "raised the prestige of England throughout Europe to a height which it had not occupied since Waterloo; created Belgium, saved Portugal and Spain from absolutism, rescued Turkey from Russia and the highway of India from France." Signal achievements. And yet they might have been more admirable by a more admirable man. Lord Palmerston's boast was, to be sure, an affectation. He was a college bred man, and his last act, at eighty years of age, gouty and decrepit, was to ride to Harrow to lay the foundation of the school library. He *did* read books. But he preferred to be known not as a reader of books but as a reader of people. He read these not ill, but basely. He studied human nature from its selfish side; he judged men by their worst notions and utilized their worst impulses. He studied and used the art of making the worse appear the better reason. He was "content to have the same predilections as the majority; to have the same likes and dislikes as his country:" a form of patriotism doubtless, but not the highest patriotism in a *leader* who from his very eminence is able best to see the higher justice, and has power to make it plain to others. Contrast the great leader who was preëminently the man of books. The "unapproached supremacy" of Gladstone lay in his insistence on the ethical; his assertion of the higher morality as against selfishness and present expediency. He was an idealist; and it was his idealism—the result of a profoundly religious nature fostered by incessant contact with books—it was his idealism that was his motive of action and his power. Can any one doubt which character has left the nobler impress?—It may be a complacent

thing to have changed the boundary of an empire: it is a *finer* thing to have kept fixed before a great people the boundary between right and wrong.

Large examples, I know, and large affairs. But in the moral world, as in the æsthetic, it is not the size of the affair that counts, but the quality you apply to it.

If you have gained ideals from books, or otherwise from your academic life do not be ashamed of them and do not hesitate to apply them. They may not be so musty after all, nor prove so inapplicable to the present uses of society. The ancients cannot tell us much of service to the industrial arts of today or to modern commerce. In technology the entire body of classical literature isn't a circumstance to that 25 K. W. dynamo which you installed in your machine shop last year. But when it comes to the moral, the social and the political questions, and the matters of taste and feeling, even the ancients still have something for us. As to these "no greater men are now than ever were." So Emerson thought and said, and Emerson touched no mean height himself.

For rules of conduct at least we need not await tomorrow's newspaper. Mr. Lowell once defined the aim of a university as he thought it: to "make a gentleman of every youth put under our charge;—not a conventional gentleman but a man of culture, a man of intellectual resource, a man of public spirit, a man of refinement, with that good taste which is the conscience of the mind, and that conscience which is the good taste of the soul." An admirable epitome, and well suited to our era: but here is a description of a gentleman who lived eighteen centuries ago written by a gentleman who died over seventeen centuries ago. Consider if any essential be lacking.

“Gentleness, yet unwavering adherence to judgments formed after due deliberation; indifference to honors commonly so-called; industry and assiduity; readiness to listen to any scheme for promoting the public good; an inflexible determination to render every man his due; tact to choose the proper time for severity and leniency * * * a sense of fellowship with mankind. * * * In every situation * * * contented, cheery, thoughtful of the future and careful about small matters, without fussiness. * * * Toward the gods not superstitious nor toward men demagogical, obsequious, or studious of popularity; an enemy of sophistry, vulgarity or pedantry,—in all things sober and steadfast.”

Standards change; and the relative proportions of things. At Harvard in the 18th century they used to fine profanity at two shillings sixpence and lying at but one and six. Today we deprecate profanity, but we *abhor* a liar. Standards change; but the essential qualities of a gentleman as a pagan saw them seventeen centuries ago seem to tally fairly with the essentials as we see them today.

I think Lowell's aim for a university as a breeder of gentlemen—gentlemen of both sexes—worthy of consideration. But Mr. Lowell had it must be admitted an archaic notion of a university. He would have preferred to see it “a place where nothing useful is taught.” You are going out into the world to be *useful*; you are to do practical things, not merely to think true and agreeable things, and I would not for a moment diminish your ardor for this doing, nor the glory of the practical thing done. But where moral or æsthetic standards apply, where a principle is involved, where an ideal offers, do not hesitate to assert it. You may be ridiculed: but ridicule isn't fatal. You may even be charged

with a rediscovery of the Ten Commandments; but you can stand that. You will be in good company. Also, the world is drawing round to the Ten Commandments, though it doesn't always like to be told so.

The fact is, at the bottom of its heart the world loves an idealist: at first as it loves a lover,—half-quizzically, as something fragile, visionary, to be protected from itself and himself;—but then perhaps with a love that follows and adopts. At the idealist it looks first with amusement, then with suspicion, then with doubt, but finally, it may be, with conviction. Throughout, however, it looks to see whether he believes in himself. If he does, if he shows true, it finally begins to think that after all he may have found something that concerns it.

An idealist who fails is at worst but rueful. He has not succeeded; but he has stood for something that deserved to succeed,—that may succeed later on. But is anything more pitiable than the man who has made a compromise and then finds that it wasn't necessary?—Is there any one more sheepish? He has retarded society; and he has writ himself a coward.

I wish you good speed,—but I wish you even more a sure footing: and in the *long* run (it is the long run you are now entering upon)—in the long run the sure footing is principle rather than expediency. Above all, I say, whatever the affair, big or little, if you have ideals do not be ashamed of them; and if, as time goes on you find, as you certainly will find, that by standing up to and for them you have not merely bettered something outside of yourself, but have made your own life simpler, clearer, heartier, cast a grateful thought backward to the University which, with men—and books—has helped to create them.



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